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COVID-19 Crisis, Impacts on Catholic Schools, and Potential Responses: Introduction

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The COVID-19 crisis has generated unprecedented challenges for Catholic schools and their students, as is the case for other school networks. First, school closures have affected 9 in 10 school-aged children globally, with risks for the children's ability to learn when the schools are closed, and later return to school when the crisis subsides. Second, the economic recession generated by the crisis will not only affect children, but also in some cases the ability of Catholic and other private schools to maintain their enrollment, and thereby their financial sustainability, at least in countries where the schools do not benefit from government support. A wide range of policy notes are being written about potential responses to the crisis by national and international organizations, think tanks, and civil society organizations. Few of those analyses consider specifically Catholic schools and their students, but some do, and the others are still relevant. It is likely that much of this wide-ranging analytical effort is not reaching Catholic schools leaders, as the focus is typically on policy dialogue with governments. The main aim of this introduction and the two-part paper that follows is to provide a synthesis of some of those materials, so that they become more accessible to Catholic school teachers and leaders.

Keywords: COVID-19, Catholic Schools, OECD, United States, Developing countries, sub-Saharan Africa

¹ The author is a Lead Economist at the World Bank, and as part of his volunteer work a Project Manager with OIEC (Office International de l'Enseignement Catholique) and a Distinguished Research Affiliate with the Kellogg Institute at the University of Notre Dame. The analysis and views expressed in this paper are those of the author only and may not reflect the views of the World Bank, its Executive Director, or the countries they represent. This two-part paper was written by the author purely in a personal capacity, but analysis for developing countries benefited from insights from World Bank colleagues, including teams working on EdTech (Mike Trucano Robert Hawkins, Iñaki Sanchez Ciarrusta, Alex Twinomugisha, Cristobal Cobo, and Sharon Zacharia), and broader policy responses (Halsey Rogers, Shwetlena Sabarwal, Ciro Avitabile, Jessica Lee, Koji Miyamoto, Soren Nellemann, and Sergio Venegas Marin). Suggestions from Timothy Uhl are also appreciated. Any errors or omissions are however the author's alone. At the Journal of Catholic Education, support from Rebecca Stephenson is much appreciated.

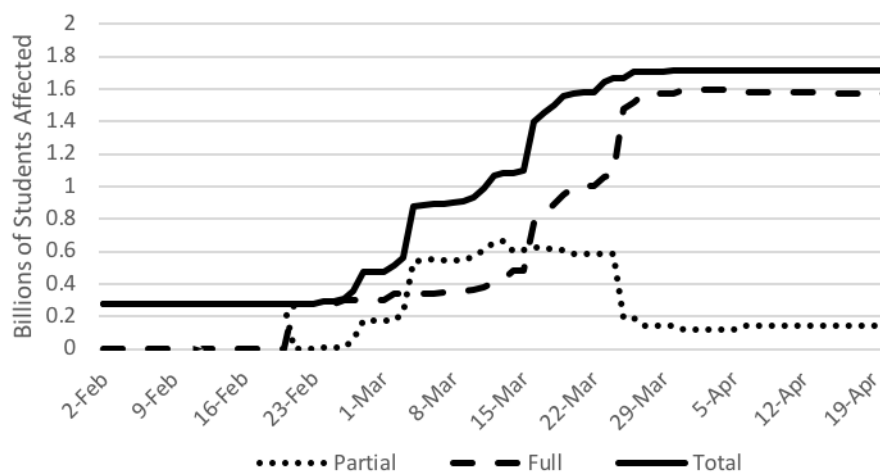
Introduction

At the time of writing this paper, more than four million cases of coronavirus infections have been identified globally. The actual number of people infected is likely a multiple of those estimates given the lack of widespread testing in many countries and the fact that many individuals with the virus are asymptomatic. The official number of deaths from COVID-19, the illness caused by the virus, is soon to reach 300,000 worldwide. Again, actual figures are likely to be much larger due to underreporting. The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on students and education systems, including Catholic school networks, are likely to be major, both immediately due to school closures, but also in the short and medium term due to the associated economic crisis and the risk of multiple surges from the pandemic.

Consider first school closures. More than 9 in 10 students in schools globally have been affected by temporary school closures according to data from UNICEF. After initial closures in China and a few other East Asian countries, European countries and the United States were part of the second wave of closures. However, closures quickly spread to other regions. Figure 1 shows the number of students affected globally since early February until April 20, 2020, depending on whether partial or full school closures were mandated in their countries. Data on student enrollment by country are from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics.

Figure 1

Number of Students Affected by School Closure



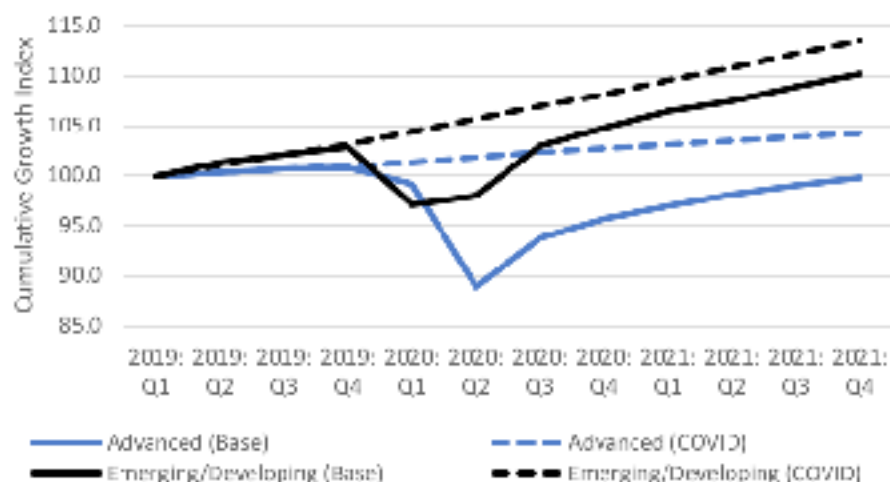
Note. Data source: UNESCO

By the end of March, most countries had implemented full (national) closures that apply to public and private K-12 schools alike, and often to universities as well. At the time of writing, while some countries have started to progressively reopen their schools, most have not done so. There is a risk that in countries with partial or full reopening, schools may have to be closed again later depending on the evolution of the pandemic. Globally, at least 1.6 billion students have been affected.

Consider next the economic impacts of the crisis that are also likely to be massive. The International Monetary Fund (2020) suggests that globally, GDP may decrease by 3% in 2020 (the decrease in the second quarter will be much larger). This would represent the deepest recession since the Great Depression. As shown in Figure 2, in percentage points from the base, advanced economies will suffer from larger losses in GDP than emerging and developing economies, but the gap between both sets of countries is smaller when considering changes in GDP per capita since population growth is higher in emerging and developing economies. In addition, emerging and developing economies are less equipped in terms of fiscal space and institutional capacity to respond to the crisis. The effects of the crisis on children and households may have more severe consequences in emerging and developing economies because a larger share of the population already lives in extreme poverty.

Figure 2

Projected Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on GDP



Note. Data source: International Monetary Fund

School closures and the economic crisis will affect students in profound ways. There is currently a flurry of materials being written about potential responses to the crisis by international organizations, think tanks, and civil society organizations. Few of those analyses consider specifically impacts for Catholic schools and their students. But they are nevertheless relevant for Catholic school teachers and leaders. It is likely that much of this analytical effort is not reaching them, as the focus is typically on policy dialogue with governments. One of the aims of this review is to provide a synthesis of some of those materials, so that they become more accessible to Catholic school teachers and leaders.

The two-part paper considers the potential impacts of the crisis on Catholic schools and their students, and more importantly how the schools may be able to respond. The first part of the paper focuses on developed countries, and in particular the United States, because U.S. Catholic schools are especially vulnerable to the economic downturn due to lack of federal and state funding. The second part considers developing countries, with a focus on sub-Saharan Africa not only because this is the region with the largest and fastest growing number of students enrolled in Catholic schools, but also because children in the region will be especially vulnerable to the various impacts of the crisis.

The fact that the paper is divided into two parts may lead to a few repetitions, but hopefully such repetitions has been kept to a minimum. The main rationale for organizing the analysis into two parts is the fact that while impacts and responses can at a general level be discussed in a common framework, in practice the challenges faced by schools and how they may respond is fairly different in both sets of countries. In addition, because one of the aims of the paper is to share many resources through footnotes providing links to the web, both papers are a bit (too) lengthy, and a single paper combining both analyses would clearly be too long. Finally, most readers may be interested primarily in how the crisis may affect Catholic schools and students in their own country. Therefore, it seems more practical and useful to conduct the analysis separately for developed and developing countries, even though again conceptually the discussion is organized in the same way in both parts of the paper.

The focus of the discussion is on primary (elementary) and secondary (middle and high) schools, as opposed to preschools and tertiary education, even though preschools and colleges and universities will also suffer from the

crisis.² In terms of organizational structure, the two parts of the paper explore first some of the immediate impacts of the crisis due to school closures together with potential responses, and next short and medium term impacts due to the recession, again with responses.

Immediate Impacts of the Crisis and Potential Responses

Consider first the immediate impacts of school closures and potential responses. The closures may have immediate negative impacts on the schools themselves, for example if they are losing revenues or need to reimburse part of the tuition they received from parents. Yet the impacts on students are likely to be much more consequential, with multiple losses including in terms of learning, psychological well-being, and nutrition. The learning losses are obvious enough. Children often suffer such learning losses every year during the summer, especially if they are from disadvantaged backgrounds. These losses will be exacerbated by the crisis and Catholic schools will not be immune, even if they succeed in implementing quality distance learning. In developing countries especially, because learning levels are already so low (World Bank, 2018), learning losses may take a toll.

In addition, many students will come back to school less well prepared in the fall, and some may drop out, especially in developing countries. Students will also suffer from distress, which will impact their health, including their mental health. One might conjecture that on average, students in Catholic schools may possibly do slightly better than other students because they tend to belong to schools and communities where social bonds tend to be strong, but they will be affected. In addition, students from disadvantaged backgrounds will suffer from the loss of school breakfasts or lunches.

Catholic schools, whether in developed or developing countries, have a limited ability to respond right now to the nutrition and mental health impacts of the crisis on students. They may help set up alternative food distribution networks, and they may invest in counseling services and

2 In the case of colleges and universities, especially those with limited endowments who rely almost exclusively on tuition to fund operations, the crisis may lead to a drop in revenues for several reasons. First, in countries such as the United States, some universities may suffer from a smaller number of international students in the fall. Second and more generally, even though enrollment in tertiary education often increases during recessions given a lack of attractive job opportunities, for many individuals right now, going back to university or staying for one or two more years to get another degree may not be feasible due to particularly steep income losses due to the recession.

socio-emotional learning when they reopen, but in terms of immediate response, their focus is on distance learning. However, how schools will be able to provide distance learning is very different in developed and developing countries given differences in access rates to the internet which restrict the types of distance learning that can take place, even if other options exist with radio, television, or mobile phones.

Data from the International Telecommunications Union on key information and communications technology (ICT) indicators are provided in Table 1 for selected years and by level of development of countries as well as for Africa. The share of the population covered by a mobile cellular network is high globally, including in Africa and in least developed countries (LDCs) where 9 in 10 individuals live in a geographic area with coverage. Penetration of mobile cellular telephone subscriptions is also high in Africa (80 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants) and in LDCs (75 subscriptions), although the share of those mobile phones that are smart phones is not available for many countries. On the other hand, penetration rates for active mobile broadband subscriptions in Africa and LDCs, at 34 and 33 per 100 inhabitants respectively, are much lower than those observed in developed countries. Only 1 in 10 households have a computer at home in Africa and LDCs, versus more than 4 in 5 in developed countries. Less than 1 in 5 households have access to the internet in Africa versus 9 in 10 in developed countries. For LDCs, the rate is even lower at just over 1 in 10 households. Finally, only slightly more than a quarter of adults in Africa and 1 in 5 in LDCs use the internet at home or elsewhere, versus almost 9 in 10 in developed countries. While these rates are increasing over time in Africa and LDCs, it may take a long time for even half of households to have access to the internet at home in many developing countries. While distance learning through the internet will still be beneficial during school closures for the children who are fortunate to have access, for most children other approaches are needed.

Given lack of access to the internet in many low income countries, multi-modal distance learning responses are required to reach all students using a variety of media such as radio, television, and mobile phones. Guidance on such responses has been provided by many organizations, including my own (World Bank, 2020). Some of this guidance is summarized in part two of the paper, together with links to a range of resources that can be helpful in implementing the responses. Of note, again given lack of access to the internet for a majority of the population, some sub-Saharan countries are also

Table 1

Key ICT Indicators by Development Level (per 100 Inhabitants)

	2005	2010	2015	2018	2019*
Mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions					
Developed countries	82.1	113.3	125.2	126.8	128.9
Developing countries	22.9	68.5	91.7	99.4	103.8
World	33.9	76.6	97.4	104.0	108.0
Least Developed Countries	5.0	33.1	66.4	70.8	74.9
Africa	12.4	44.3	75.3	76.7	80.1
Active mobile-broadband subscriptions					
Developed countries	N/A	44.7	91.0	115.1	121.7
Developing countries	N/A	4.5	35.7	61.0	75.2
World	N/A	11.5	45.1	70.1	83.0
Least Developed Countries	N/A	0.4	14.7	28.9	33.1
Africa	N/A	1.7	19.0	30.7	34.0
Population covered by a mobile-cellular network					
Developed countries	N/A	N/A	98.5	98.7	98.8
Developing countries	N/A	N/A	94.1	96.0	96.2
World	N/A	N/A	94.8	96.5	96.6
Least Developed Countries	N/A	N/A	86.4	88.2	88.7
Africa	N/A	N/A	86.9	88.9	89.4
Households with a computer					
Developed countries	55.3	71.1	79.8	81.6	82.3
Developing countries	15.6	24.7	33.9	37.5	38.5
World	27.3	37.3	45.9	48.8	49.7
Least Developed Countries	1.4	3.5	6.9	9.2	9.5
Africa	3.7	5.8	8.0	10.1	10.7
Households with Internet access at home					
Developed countries	44.9	66.3	80.2	85.1	87.0
Developing countries	9.0	19.8	35.4	44.2	46.7
World	19.6	32.5	47.1	54.7	57.0
Least Developed Countries	0.6	3.4	8.2	11.1	11.8
Africa	1.8	5.2	13.5	17.0	17.8
Individuals using the Internet					
Developed countries	52.8	66.5	76.8	84.9	86.6
Developing countries	8.1	21.1	34.2	44.7	47.0
World	16.8	29.3	41.5	51.4	53.6
Least Developed Countries	1.4	5.5	12.4	17.6	19.1
Africa	2.7	9.9	20.3	26.3	28.2

Note. Source: International Telecommunications Union.

implementing distributions of learning materials directly at home, with guidance for parents on how to use these materials to promote learning by their children.

In part one of the paper for developed countries, access to the internet is less of a problem (although steps are still very much needed to ensure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have access), but one issue is how to sort through the massive amounts of materials that are available online. The paper provides a selection of websites that have been recognized as especially well curated, including some of the resources highlighted in a study by HundredED (2020), as well as links to resources specifically for Catholic schools.

How are Catholic schools responding to the immediate challenges resulting from the current crisis? While multiple sources of data are used to respond to this question in the two parts of the paper, one interesting source of data is a short survey implemented at the end of April 2020 by the International Office of Catholic Education (*Office International de l'Enseignement Catholique* in French or OIEC). Within a week, 171 responses were received from 31 countries – 10 countries (and 11 Catholic school networks) in developed countries, 11 countries in Africa, and another 10 other developing or emerging countries. Overall, these countries account for 6 in 10 students in Catholic schools globally.

A key question was whether Catholic school networks had been able to implement distance learning solutions for their students, and if so, using which media (options included the internet, radio, television, mobile phones, other means, or none). Table 2 provides key results.

Table 2

Distance Learning Solutions by Medium, Catholic Schools, Multiple Countries (% of Countries)

	Internet	Radio	Television	Mobile phones	Others	None
Developed Countries	100.0	0.0	27.3	18.2	18.2	0.0
Developing countries	71.3	23.8	19.8	63.4	20.4	19.0
Africa	54.5	45.5	18.2	45.5	18.2	36.4
Other developing countries	89.8	0.0	21.5	83.2	22.8	0.0

Note. Source: Author, using OIEC survey.

As expected, developed countries have relied principally on the internet, while developing countries, especially those in Africa, have relied also on other media. What is worrying though is that in 1 in 5 developing countries, and especially in Africa where the proportion is higher, no distance learning solutions had yet been implemented by Catholic schools. Additional efforts will be required from these Catholic school networks to reach students during school closures, especially if the closures start anew in the fall in case there is a new surge in the pandemic. Both parts of the paper provide some guidance on how to do this, but it matters especially in Africa.

Short and Medium Term Impacts of the Crisis and Potential Responses

Consider next the economic crisis. In developing countries, the crisis may have massive negative impacts for children, with some students likely not to return to school when the schools reopen. This will be the case if the out-of-pocket and opportunity costs of going back to school become too high for disadvantaged groups. Responding to the crisis may therefore require incentives for parents to enable children to go back to schools, whether these incentives take the form of cash transfer, school lunches, free uniforms, or waiving of fees. Communication campaigns may also be helpful, as was the case after the end of the Ebola crisis in West Africa a few years ago. In addition, teachers may need to teach at the (post-crisis) level of their students, with remedial education provided to help students catch up on the curriculum. Counseling services and investments in socio-emotional skills may also be needed to help students cope with the stress generated by the school closures and even more so the economic crisis.

Schools may also need to make sure that their facilities are safe, not only by providing water and soap, but also by adopting if needed special procedures to ensure that students are not exposed to the coronavirus through each other (alternate shifts, smaller class size, etc.). They may also need to adapt final examinations, especially if they are high-stake, so that students are not being penalized by the fact that they were not able to attend schools for several months. Finally, schools may face limited budgets as the crisis squeezes their sources of revenues, whether the support comes from the state (many Catholic schools in developing countries are public schools) or from parents.

These challenges are massive. Are Catholic schools ready to respond? Again, multiple sources of data are used in the two-part paper to answer this question, but for this introduction, the quickest way to provide some insights

Table 3

Plans for Students When Catholic Schools Reopen, Multiple Countries (% of Countries)

	Plans for adapting the curriculum	Plans for remedial education	No plans
Developed Countries	81.8	72.7	0.0
Developing countries	58.6	43.4	24.1
Africa	36.4	27.3	45.5
Other developing countries	83.1	61.1	0.6

Note. Source: Author, using OIEC survey.

is to rely on simple statistics from the OIEC survey mentioned earlier. Table 3 suggests that a smaller share of Catholic school networks in developing countries, especially in Africa, are planning to adapt the curriculum and provide remedial education to enable children to catch up. Here as well, Catholic (and other) school networks may need to up their game to support students when schools reopen.

In addition to the above challenges, there is an additional threat that Catholic schools may face in some countries – the threat of a major loss in enrollment. This threat is especially large in countries where for some time enrollment has been on a downward trend due in part to issues of affordability as the schools do not benefit from state support, or benefit only from limited support. This is especially the case for the United States. Massive increases in unemployment are leading to income losses for households and thus a reduced ability to afford tuition costs. This impact is already being felt through a drop in registrations for the next school year. In some of the other developed countries, the risks are lower however, especially when operating costs are paid by the state. In developing countries, the threat is real as well, not only because of affordability concerns in some countries, but also because some children may simply drop out of school. In some countries Catholic schools are however protected, either because they benefit from government subsidies, or because there is such a large demand for schooling from population growth and gains in educational attainment that demand for Catholic schools may remain strong. As before, results from the OIEC survey provide some insights as to how the threat of a loss of enrollment in Catholic schools may be, depending on the countries. Table 4 provides the shares of the Catholic school networks by type of country that expect different levels of losses in enrollment. Larger losses appear more likely in developing countries, with the United States being an outlier among developed countries due to the particular vulnerability of Catholic schools in that country.

Table 4

Expected Decline in Enrollment in Catholic Schools, Multiple Countries (% of Countries)

	Decline of at least 10%	Decline of 5% to 10%	Decline below 5%	No expected Decline
Developed Countries	18.2	18.2	0.0	63.6
Developing countries	45.8	9.9	19.0	25.2
Africa	36.4	9.1	27.3	27.3
Other developing countries	56.3	10.9	9.9	23.0

Note. Source: Author, using OIEC survey. The sum of the categories may not add up to exactly 100 percent when some respondents provided multiple responses.

Conclusion

Catholic schools and their students face both immediate and short to medium term challenges due to the COVID-19 crisis, as is the case for other types of schools. A flurry of policy notes and other resources have been made available over the last few months to help schools and education systems think about potential responses to the crisis. While few of those analyses consider specifically Catholic schools, some do, and the policy discussions that are not focused on Catholic schools remain relevant for those schools as well. It is likely that much of this wide-ranging analytical effort is not reaching Catholic school leaders and teachers, as the focus is typically on policy advice for and dialogue with public schools. The main aim of the two-part paper for which this note serves as an introduction is to provide a synthesis of some of those materials, so that they become more accessible to Catholic schools. While it is rather difficult to summarize here quickly the vast array of resources that are available to guide Catholic school responses, this introduction has provided a few pointers on the challenges faced by Catholic schools and some of their responses, highlighting some of the gaps that remain to be filled.

The analysis in this two-part paper was done very quickly in order to provide resources for Catholic school teachers and leaders as they confront the crisis in real time. Some resources or issues may have been overlooked and much remains unknown on how the crisis will evolve. But hopefully the analysis, and especially the links provided in footnotes to websites with great materials, will be useful. One last point is not discussed in the paper as it is a different topic: in order to respond to the needs of their students and communities in this difficult time, Catholic schools should invest in basic data collection, measurement, and research, so that they have the information they need in order to better calibrate their response. This is true in normal times, but it is probably even more important today.

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